

Rankin Reflects

Britain's top crime writer shares his life, views on writing

Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

On October 25 2018 the Ottawa International Writers Festival hosted bestselling Scottish crime writer Ian Rankin for a luncheon with fans and a guest interview that evening. Following the afternoon event Canadian crime novelist and reviewer Jim Napier met at a nearby pub for a bite and a pint, and renewed a friendship that stretches back over twenty years. The following is a brief account of that interview, edited for length. Given all the books and all the honours that Rankin has accrued over time, Napier began their conversation with a facetious question.

So, Ian, how does it feel to be an overnight success?

Yeah, right! You know what? I think if you work for it, it feels all the sweeter. There were a lot of times in my career when the books weren't selling, the publishers were getting ready to drop me because they weren't making any money, I was doubting my own abilities, my wife was going to get a job, and we couldn't survive from writing. You know what it did? It just galvanised me and made me work all the harder. Because it was the only thing I knew how to do, write books. But it's been a slow build from my first Rebus novel [that] sold I think maybe five hundred copies, and the next one something like a thousand. I kept getting great reviews so the media were on board, and I got [some] prizes, and eventually it all came good. But it took a long time. The first book was published when I

was twenty-five or six, the first Rebus book was published when I was twenty-seven, [and] I was in my forties before I was making a living.



Jim Napier and Ian Rankin (r)

We first met in 1997, when you took home the CWA Gold Dagger for *Black and Blue*, and it seemed to me that you were well on your way at that point.

Not really. You know, people get this feeling that because you're winning prizes and stuff that you must be making a lot of money, but *Black and Blue* didn't hit the top ten in the UK or anywhere else. It was never a top ten best seller. The one after that, *The Hanging Garden*, had one week at number ten in the UK, still not a best seller anywhere else, and I think the book after that [*Dead Souls*] possibly went on to number one. So [I wrote] like ten Rebus novels before I was hitting the number one slot.

What made you pick crime fiction as a genre?

I don't think I did; I think crime fiction picked me. I was trying to write about Edinburgh. It's got quite a dark history. A lot of gothic fiction has been set there, or written by Edinburgh authors. *Jeckyl and Hyde*, and *Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, which as far as I know is the first serial killer novel in history, about a religious zealot who starts killing people who don't agree with his religion.

Was this basis for Bible John?

Well, maybe. Who knows if Bible John actually existed? There's some controversy these days about that. But I like to write about Edinburgh, I like to write about Scotland, I like to write about social issues [and] I found that crime fiction is a good way of doing it. [At that point] I hadn't actually

written a crime novel. The first Rebus novel, *Knots and Crosses*, was meant to be Jeckyl and Hyde updated, but nobody realised that. As far as they were concerned it was a crime novel. You know, I hadn't read [any] crime fiction. I was a Ph.D. student doing Scottish literature. I was going to be a professor of English. I didn't want to be a crime writer!

I think most Rebus fans are happy you didn't stick with that plan! If I had to guess I'd say you don't really buy into the distinction between literary and genre fiction.

I really don't. And specifically these days, I think a lot of younger writers are writing genre who a generation ago would have wanted to be "literary novelists", and they don't see a distinction.

Is that more true over on your side of the water than here?

I dunno. I think the UK and the States, and maybe Canada, were slow to pick up on the fact that commercial fiction could also be quality fiction. Whereas other countries, France, for example, they always took the crime novel seriously. They saw it as being an extension of the existential novel. These detectives, these loner maverick detectives, were existential heroes, making their own rules and living [by them]. In the UK and in America, not so much. [But] I think the change is definitely happening, and now in the UK you can study crime fiction in university, you can study crime fiction in creative writing classes at university, and in high schools in Scotland you can study my

books. So crime fiction is starting to be taken seriously.

Between the writing and the book tours, you have a very heavy schedule. Are you able to carve out some quality family time these days?

At the moment, no. The big UK tour (because the book [Rankin's latest, *In a House of Lies*], is published in the UK slightly before Canada) I got home Saturday morning...and came to Canada Monday morning. So I had basically under two days at home with the family. I'm out here for a week, I go back and I get maybe ten days and then I'm back on the road again. The UK tour starts again, and takes me through until Christmas, I get Christmas and New Year off, and then I go to the States January and February. So I cannae start to see daylight again until mid-February.

So at that point will you start writing again?

No, probably not, for various reasons. Number one, I'm on a one-book-every-two-years contract, so I don't need to deliver a book next year at all. And we're off to downsizing. We're moving from a big house to a small apartment. So I've got a lot of work to do to get rid of stuff... I've got to get my head around that, get the house sold, move into the apartment, and then maybe—I mean, I usually write my books the first half of the year. [Take this new book [*In a House of Lies*]: in January I had nothing. I got an idea for it in January, started writing it in February, it was delivered in June and it published in October.

What kind of workdays does that make for you?

Twelve hour days, seven days a week. [But] you know, when your story starts flying you've got to stick with it. But next year could be different. The first half of the year could be me selling the house and moving into an apartment. So I might not start writing until June [or] July, and two things could happen there: one, I write the next book very quickly and it's delivered by the end of the year, or I take my time, and I've got a year to write the book instead of six months. I don't know which would be better for me. We'll see.

Both your sons are young men now. Has either shown an interest in writing as a career?

No. In fact, Jack has just successfully read on of my novels, at the age of twenty-six. He tried as a teenager and didn't get on with it, [then] he read my graphic novel a few years ago and said, "It's ok dad, but don't give up the day job." And now he's read *Strip Jack*, which is actually named after him, and I think he quite enjoyed it. But he's not a crime fiction reader. [These days] young people mostly aren't. It's a weird thing, but crime fiction, you mostly get into it late in life. You know what I mean? It's a genre, a way of looking at the world you only get into when you get some experience.

Coming back to your novels, the relationship between Rebus and Cafferty is one of the great Faustian relationships in literature. And

they're both getting older, and they're both finding themselves, especially Cafferty in recent years, in some bit of peril. Do you anticipate possibly weaving into that [narrative] a sort of joint intimacy, in the sense that Rebus might, for example, find himself in jeopardy and Cafferty might come to his aid, even in a deadly way?

Well, they've both [already] done it. I forget which book it is, but in one of the Rebus novels Cafferty pulls Rebus out of a nightclub fire and saves his life. And in fact in what was meant to be the final Rebus book, *Exit Music*, Cafferty is in hospital and he flatlines, and Rebus uses CPR to save him. So that's been done. You know, I've never had a plan for their relationship. I start writin' a book and I go, "Where are they now, what are they doin? Do they still hate each other? Are they friends? Are they foes?" It's a mixture. I mean, every cop needs their Moriarty figure, and I don't think either one of them can imagine a

world without the other. They enjoy the sparring, they enjoy the jousting...the games of chess and mind games that they play with each other. And also now, we see them in their mid-to-late sixties, lookin' around at a changing world that doesn't make sense to them any more. Modern technology doesn't make sense to them any more, and by this stage in their lives they are supposed to be retired and shuffled off the stage, and they just refuse to do it. So there's an extraordinary empathy between them, but possible not quite friendship.

We had lots more to discuss, but we were well past our allotted our time together, so I thanked Ian for making space in his already-crowded schedule. He needed a bit of down time, and I was looking forward to his talk at Christ Church Cathedral that evening, and even more, to our getting together once again, this time for a promised pint at a certain bar in Edinburgh.

Since 2005 more than 500 of Jim Napier's reviews and interviews have appeared in several Canadian newspapers and on such websites as *Spinetingler*, *The Rap Sheet*, *Shots Magazine*, *Crime Time*, *Reviewing The Evidence*, *January* magazine, the *Montreal Review of Books*, the *Ottawa Review of Books*, *Opal Writers' Magazine*, and his own award-winning review site, *Deadly Diversions*. His reviews can also be found on *Amazon.com* and *Goodreads*, His crime novel *Legacy* was published in the Spring of 2017, and the second in the series, *Ridley's War*, is scheduled for release in the Spring of 2019. He can be reached at jnapier@deadlydiversions.com

Previously published on...